

The *Iliad* as tragedy

Peter Jones

Is the *Iliad* a tragedy? It is certainly not a dramatic text: there is no evidence for its use as a stage performance. But as Aristotle saw, it does have many of the formal markers of a tragedy. These include divine prophecies, warnings, ignorance of the true state of affairs on the part of the characters involved (generating irony), foolish over-confidence accompanied by self-delusion, and understanding too late to avoid disaster. Throughout their plots, tragic figures are persons of high value. Their fall creates sympathy because they do what they do, willingly, for the very best of intentions, unaware of what the outcome will be (more irony). The purpose of this article is to explore the variety of these tragic elements in the *Iliad*.

I shall focus predominantly on the tragedy of Patroclus, and particularly upon Book 16, where Achilles sends his friend into battle. Patroclus' death has already been foretold by Zeus: in Book 8, Zeus points out to his disruptively pro-Greek wife Hera that Hector will drive the Greeks back to the ships and Patroclus' death is certain. Only after that will Achilles return to the fighting:

At dawn tomorrow, if you're interested, ox-eyed lady Hera, you'll witness Zeus behaving even more imperiously, destroying much of the Greek army. For I tell you, domineering Hector will give his enemies no rest till swift-footed Achilles rises up again beside the ships on the day when the Greeks, in desperate straits, are fighting at the very sterns of their vessels over the body of the dead Patroclus.

Zeus repeats the message in Book 15 after slapping down a further, brief revolt from the gods:

[The Greeks] will retreat as far as Achilles' ships and he'll send his companion Patroclus into the fight. Glorious Hector will kill Patroclus with his spear in front of Troy, after Patroclus has killed many of the enemy, including my own son godlike Sarpedon.

Most unusually, the Homeric narrator himself refers to Patroclus' impending doom. Normally, the narrator acts like a TV camera, reporting and recording what is happening, without interposing comment, let alone prophecy. So when he does throw in a comment, it takes on particular significance. In a passage in Book 11, Achilles calls for Patroclus to find out how the Greeks are doing, because it seems as if they are in trouble. The narrator comments:

Hearing the call from his quarters, Patroclus equal of Ares came out; and so began his calamity.

As often in tragedy, the audience is made aware that the character's actions, undertaken though they may be for the best of motives, are serving to bring about their own destruction. Warning-notes sound at the very start of the book. As a result of Achilles' orders in Book 11, Patroclus has seen for himself that the Greeks are on the verge of defeat and returns to inform Achilles. He suggests that, if Achilles will not himself return to battle, Achilles should send out him (Patroclus) in his (Achilles') armour:

So Patroclus spoke in supplication, the great fool. He was signing and sealing his own death warrant.

Achilles himself is aware of the danger Patroclus faces and begs him not to go too far:

So don't lead the Myrmidons on to Troy in the flush of victory, killing Trojans as you go, or one of the eternal gods from Olympus may cross your path. The archer-god Apollo loves these Trojans dearly. But turn back when you've lit the way to victory at the ships, and leave the rest to do the fighting on the plain.

Indeed, Achilles goes so far as to pray to Zeus for Patroclus' safe return, but the narrator once again intervenes, this time with a grim response:

One half the Father granted, but not the other. He allowed Patroclus to push the Trojans back from the ships, but not to return safely from battle.

When in book 16 Patroclus plunges into battle, he meets great success at first, but the narrator alerts his listeners to the terrible truth:

Had he kept to his orders from Achilles, he would have saved himself from the evil destiny that is dark death. But the will of Zeus is always superior to that of men. Zeus can easily make a brave man run away and lose a battle, but at another time that very same god will urge him on to fight. Now he put heart into Patroclus.

Like many a tragedy, Book 16 is rich in irony. Here Achilles expresses his doomed hopes for himself and Patroclus:

Ah, Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo, if only no single Trojan could survive out of the whole lot of them, and no Greek either, and we two could live through the massacre so we could tear off Troy's holy diadem of towers single-handed!

Here Achilles prays for Patroclus' safe return:

And directly he's driven the tumult and the fighting back from the ships, may he return here unharmed, with all my armour and close-fighting companions.

And like so many tragic figures (and particularly Oedipus and Pentheus), Patroclus foolishly challenges the gods. First time, he learns the lesson:

Three times Patroclus scaled an angle of the high wall; three times Apollo hurled him off, thrusting back his glittering shield with his immortal hands. But when he came on like something superhuman for the fourth time, the god gave a terrible shout and spoke winged words:

'Back, Olympian-born Patroclus! The Trojans' proud town is not destined to fall to your spear nor even to Achilles', who's a far better man than you.'

So he spoke and Patroclus retreated a good way back to avoid the wrath of the archer-god Apollo.

But not the second time:

The Greeks got the upper hand in defiance of destiny. They dragged the warrior Cebriones out from among the weapons and the yelling Trojans and stripped the armour from his back. But Patroclus with murder in his heart leapt on the enemy. Three times with an intimidating yell he charged like impetuous Ares and three times he killed nine men. But when for the fourth time he leapt in like something superhuman, that, Patroclus, was the end of you. In Only the blind fail to recognise this epic poet.

the thick of the action Phoebus encountered you, in all his terror.

Patroclus is unable to see the blind folly of what he is doing. He is, the narrator comments, 'completely deluded, the blind fool'. As Apollo strips him, 'disastrous confusion overtook Patroclus'. Only too late does he come to understand what has happened to him:

Zeus and Apollo handed you that victory. They conquered me. It was an easy task: they took the armour from my back.

At the same time, however, there is rich sympathy for Patroclus, much as there is sympathy for the fallen tragic hero. Our first sight in book 16 of Patroclus, as he comes to tell Achilles what has happened, is of a loyal Greek, feeling deeply for his fellow-soldiers' plight:

Patroclus came up to Achilles shepherd of the people, hot tears running down his face like a dark spring trickling black streaks of water down a steep rock-face.

He is all selfless nobility as he begs to be allowed to save them, unaware of what the eventual result will be:

...at least send me out at once and give me your Myrmidon troops, to see if I can be the light of salvation for the Greeks. Give me your armour to put on my shoulders.

Patroclus is a noble figure, pursuing admirable aims. His problem lies in his ignorance of the course that fate has already decreed, a course that is foretold a number of times before it unfurls. His ignorance leads him to overstep proper boundaries of behaviour and even to challenge the gods. These are exactly the hallmarks of tragic heroism. Which makes you wonder: did Homer invent tragedy some two hundred years before the dramatists?

Peter Jones' An Intelligent Person's Guide to Classics and Ancient and Modern (a collection of his weekly Spectator articles) are published by Duckworth.